ADAPTATION OF CLASSICAL MYTH IN MODERN STORYTELLING

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Abstract

Classical myths—from Greek, Roman, and Norse traditions—have inspired storytellers for centuries, and they continue to resonate in modern literature, films, and popular culture. This article explores how ancient myths are adapted in contemporary storytelling, focusing on works like Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Madeline Miller's Circe, Star Wars, and Marvel's Norse-based stories. By examining these examples, the paper shows how mythic themes, archetypes, and structures are reshaped to reflect modern values, identity issues, and societal concerns. The findings highlight that even when myths are updated or altered, their core elements remain powerful tools for storytelling, bridging ancient wisdom with today's audiences.

Keywords

classical myth, adaptation, modern storytelling, cultural narrative, hero's journey

Introduction

Stories from ancient myths have fascinated humans for millennia. They carry timeless messages about who we are, what we fear, and what we hope to achieve (Segal, 1999). Among these, Greek and Roman myths are particularly influential, offering rich narratives that continue to appear in books, movies, and TV shows. Even though these myths originated thousands of years ago, their themes remain relevant today. Modern storytellers often adapt these old stories to tackle contemporary issues, whether through novels for young adults, literary retellings, or blockbuster films (Campbell, 1949/2008; Frye, 1957).

This paper asks two main questions: Why do classical myths remain compelling for modern audiences? And how do contemporary storytellers reshape these myths to speak to today's world? To answer these questions, we examine examples such as Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson, Madeline Miller's Circe, George Lucas's Star Wars, and Marvel's Norse adaptations. These examples show different ways myths are reimagined while keeping their timeless appeal.

Understanding myths and adaptation

Myth as a cultural story

A myth is more than just an old story—it's a way for societies to explain life, death, and human behavior. Joseph Campbell described myths as expressions of universal human experiences, summarizing them in his famous "hero's journey" framework, where the hero departs, faces trials, and returns transformed (Campbell, 1949/2008). Structuralist scholars like Claude Lévi-Strauss argue that myths reveal the patterns of human thought. They are like symbolic systems that help people understand the world and their place in it (Lévi-Strauss, 1955; Jakobson, 1960).

How adaptation works

Adaptation is the process of taking an old story and giving it new life in a different medium or context. Linda Hutcheon explains that adaptations are not inferior copies—they are new works that speak to their audiences while referencing the original (Hutcheon, 2006). This is especially relevant for myths. When a storyteller adapts a classical myth, they are interpreting it through the lens of modern culture, values, and concerns, rather than merely repeating the old story.

Classical myths in Modern Literature

Percy Jackson and the Olympians

Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series brings Greek gods and heroes into contemporary America (Riordan, 2005–2009). The characters, many of whom are demigods, live in a world that blends the mythical and the modern, like the summer camp 'Camp Half-Blood'. Riordan's approach makes ancient myths accessible to young readers while exploring issues like identity and self-discovery. Percy, for example, struggles with dyslexia and ADHD, framing heroism in a way that feels relatable today. Ancient quests and battles are still present, but they resonate in a modern context, showing how myths can be adapted without losing their magic.

Circe Madeline Miller's Circe (2018) retells the story of Circe, a minor figure in Homer's Odyssey, giving her a central voice. Circe evolves from a silenced nymph into a powerful, independent figure, allowing readers to explore themes of autonomy, gender, and personal growth. Miller's adaptation highlights how classical myths can be reinterpreted to reflect modern values. It demonstrates that retelling old stories can shed light on new questions, like women's agency or the complexity of moral choices in a contemporary lens.

Myths on screen and in popular culture

Star Wars and the hero's journey

George Lucas's Star Wars saga does not adapt a single classical myth, but it borrows mythic structures from multiple traditions (Kaminsky, 1994). Lucas openly used Campbell's hero's journey as a blueprint. Luke Skywalker's story mirrors the classic hero's journey: he receives a call to adventure, finds mentors, faces trials, and returns changed. These timeless structures resonate with audiences because they echo the patterns of classical myth while remaining entertaining and visually compelling.

Norse mythology in the Marvel Universe

Marvel's adaptations of Thor and Loki take inspiration from Norse myths, but they reimagine these characters for modern superhero narratives (Brode & Miller, 2012). Thor becomes a god and a relatable superhero, while Loki, the trickster, evolves into a complex antihero. These adaptations preserve the symbolic meaning of mythic characters but make them relatable to contemporary viewers. The blend of ancient myth and modern genres keeps the stories relevant and entertaining.

The reason why myths stay relevant is classical myths endure because they deal with universal human experiences: the struggle between order and chaos, the journey of self-discovery, and the fight for moral justice (Segal, 1999). Modern adaptations take these themes and apply them to current issues: young adult identity in Percy Jackson, gender and empowerment in Circe, moral choices in Star Wars, and modern heroism in Marvel's Norse universe. By using familiar archetypes, myths also help storytellers explore complex ideas without overwhelming audiences. Mythic structures offer a bridge between ancient wisdom and contemporary social concerns, providing both continuity and flexibility.

Discussion

Modern adaptations often diverge from the original myths, yet their core structures remain. Reimagining myths allows authors and filmmakers to reflect current cultural values. For example:

- Riordan reshapes heroism for young audiences facing modern challenges.
- Miller reclaims a silenced female character, emphasizing empowerment.
- Star Wars and Marvel combine mythic templates with modern genres to create entertaining narratives that still reflect universal human concerns.
- Critics argue that some adaptations may simplify myths for commercial purposes (Dundes, 1984). Still, even when altered, the essential motifs—heroes, journeys, conflicts, and transformation—remain influential.

Conclusion

The adaptation of classical myths in modern storytelling demonstrates the timeless appeal of these ancient narratives. Through literature, film, and popular media, mythic structures are reshaped to reflect contemporary society, identity issues, and moral dilemmas. Even when

modernized, these myths preserve their symbolic power and continue to guide storytelling across generations. Classical myths, therefore, are not static relics but living frameworks, adaptable to new contexts while maintaining their core messages. Their endurance reflects both their narrative power and their ability to resonate with universal human experiences.

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